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# **Interrogating child migrants or ‘Third Culture Kids’ in Asia: An introduction<sup>1</sup>**

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Research on children and youth involved in migration in Asia is predominantly—and understandably—concerned with those who move to improve their livelihoods. This includes those young people who move with their families as well as the effects on those ‘left behind’. Substantial routes and streams include rural-to-urban migration to the burgeoning factory work sector in China in the context of industrialization (Murphy, 2002; Pun, 2005); Filipino women moving to globalizing cities, such as Hong Kong and Singapore, in the domestic work sector (Constable, 1997); Indonesian workers migrating to Malaysia or the Gulf, lured by prospects of higher wages in rubber plantations or on construction sites (Lindquist, 2010); young Chinese moving to Japan to work or study (Coates, 2013); and young people from Myanmar crossing the border into Thailand in search of more stable and promising futures (Ball and Moselle, 2015). In addition, significant numbers of Asians migrate to the US, Canada, Australia, the Gulf countries and Europe. The processes that engender these diverse movements extend beyond Asia, however: the global flows of capital and their consequences also spark the movements of banking staff from other parts of the world to financial hubs such as Singapore (Beaverstock, 2002); transnational corporations move staff into subsidiaries across Asia; and those disaffected by what they perceive as the daily grind of life in high income countries seek temporary reprieve in the warm climes of beach resorts in Goa and Thailand (Thang et al., 2012). Further, the relatively low-income status of, for example, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar channels an influx of international aid agency staff into these countries.

The contention underlying this thematic section is that these different kinds of migrations are not fundamentally distinct phenomena, but rather, that they are generated by, and in turn shaping the same global processes. We argue that although these movements may take place on very different socio-economic strata, political circumstances and regulatory regimes, this

is not a reason to conceptually separate them. Yet, this is precisely how much of the debate on migration in and across Asia has been implicitly organized, often without questioning why. ‘Labor migration’--predominantly of the manual or low-skilled kind—is set apart from what is, at best, glossed as ‘high-skilled migration.’ Workers in the latter group tend to think of themselves not as labor migrants, but rather as ‘mobile professionals,’ ‘expatriates,’ or ‘international educators.’ In addition, there are ‘lifestyle migrants’ referring to people from affluent industrialized countries who move abroad in order to find a more meaningful and relaxed life, usually in places with lower living costs and sunny climates (see e.g., Benson and O’Reilly, 2009). What these terms encapsulate is perhaps best described, for want of a more precise term, as privileged migration. More than a decade ago, Vered Amit captured these forms of mobility in the edited volume, *Going First Class* (Amit, 2007). In many ways, the articles gathered in this thematic section are a continuation of the arguments initially put forward there, with a special emphasis on children and youth who are also involved with privileged migration.

Then, as now, the conceptual and practical distinction that separates research on privileged migration—those who travel ‘first class,’ as well as more ‘middling’ ones—from those who are not privileged, presented as the majority, mode of migration --still holds, attempts at theorizing a ‘middling transnationalism’ notwithstanding (Conradson and Latham, 2005). In a significant development, however, research on various forms of privileged migrations has expanded and gained in depth, drawing on a wide range of conceptual tools and theoretical and disciplinary approaches (e.g., Lucassen and Smit, 2015). Yet, this does not imply that such distinctions have disappeared, or that theoretical insights gained in one field have made sustained incursions into the other. If such a snapshot characterizes the situation of research on migrating adults, it arguably extends even more to work on mobilities including or affecting children and young people, whether they are with their migrant families, have been ‘left behind,’ or are moving independently.

This juncture provides the point of departure for this thematic section. One overarching objective is to make more permeable the boundaries that tend to separate debates on different forms of migration and mobility as measured by the extent of their access to, and benefitting from socio-economic, political, national, cultural and linguistic privilege. While a breaking down of these boundaries and entwining divergent strands of migration studies constitute a mid-term ambition, the immediate contribution of the articles here is to make visible and

query categories that are routinely employed to understand ‘privileged migrant’ children. In particular, these include the prominence of ‘national’ cultures to the extent of crowding out other relevant vectors of analysis. This thematic section therefore aims to broaden the framework of ‘child migration’ to include those who are economically and socially privileged, and to critically reconsider the conceptual framework of ‘Third Culture Kids’ (Pollock and Van Reken, 1999). The papers in this section contribute to this aim through empirical studies and theoretical reflections on transnationally mobile children and youth. Rather than taking their privileged positions for granted, however, these are examined, and their possible implications made visible.

The relationships between children and transnational mobility are often conceptualized in two separate analytical frameworks. The first focuses on comparatively disenfranchised children, such as independent child migrants, those who move with their families, or children ‘left behind;’ consequently, debates tend to focus on how their welfare, education or livelihoods are affected by mobility. At the same time, rather different paradigms are invoked in relation to more affluent children: the notion of ‘Third Culture Kids’ (TCKs) is perhaps the most iconic and popular one in this context. Research on TCKs tends to foreground issues of identity and belonging, underpinned by rather static and reified understandings of culture.

By definition, TCKs are individuals who, having spent a significant proportion of their developmental years in a culture other than their parents’ home culture, develop a sense of relationship to all of these cultures, while not having full ownership of any. They incorporate into their life experience elements of each culture they have been part of, and their sense of belonging is in relationship to others with similar experiences (Pollock and Van Reken, 1999: 26-31). The concept was initially coined in the 1960s by Ruth Hill Useem (1973) but it became more widely known in the 1970s and 1980s. The term has gained popularity as an identity label among expatriate children and young adults, and international schools often use it as well. Although there is large body of non-academic literature using the concept (including guides to expatriate families), scholars tend to find it problematic as an analytical term (Tanu, 2015). In other words, although the term seems to work as a descriptive label and it is popular outside of academia, it runs into trouble when used analytically because, among others, of the homogenizing, American-centric, approach on which it was developed and its very essentializing view of cultures. Nevertheless, scholars continue to use it for lack of a better term and in the past decade, research on TCKs has extended to the social sciences as well. Very often, however, this research is discussed in rather narrow terms.

Another purpose of this thematic section is to make visible as well as to interrogate the compartmentalization between the more and the less affluent migrant children. We suggest that it might be symptomatic of a wider tendency in migration studies to discuss those who are socio-economically, politically, and legally privileged separately from those who are less so. A further objective is to bring the study of more affluent children into the field of migration studies, and view them through the lens of mobility, thus broadening existing, somewhat narrow notions of 'child migration.' We also argue that it is important and timely to analytically dis-embed children who attend international schools from the circumscribed categories of 'Third Culture Kids' or 'future world citizens,' and to bring the wealth of literature and knowledge of migration studies to productively bear on this phenomenon. This means, for example, engaging the experiences of so-called 'Third Culture Kids' with regard to issues of race, ethnicity, and nationalism. Instead of taking the concept as a descriptive label, the articles in this thematic section carefully investigate what it means to be an expatriate child or teenager in various contexts. In today's world, there are many more children and young people who can be labeled as Third Culture Kids than there was when the concept was first introduced. The articles in this thematic section show that the children and teenagers' everyday realities are much more diverse than what the definitions of the term initially assumed. Much of the existing literature on Third Culture Kids focuses on identity issues from a psychological perspective. The articles in this collection, however, do not discuss the children from the perspective of psychology but all the authors have conducted their studies from the perspective of social sciences, social anthropology in particular.

There are a number of broad themes emerging from the set of papers in this thematic section: these include ethnographically grounded critiques of the TCKs, which also challenge a methodological tendency to limit research settings to international schools. Further, the papers embrace a profound and overdue shift towards placing children's own perspectives at the center of enquiry; finally, they give due recognition to the relevance of geographical, social and political positionalities, and how these impact on, and shape ideas of children growing up transnationally mobile. With these central themes, the proposed collection aims to make a significant contribution to migration studies through providing original empirical data as well as innovative conceptual and theoretical approaches to the study of transnationally mobile children and youth.

One assumption shared by the papers here is that it is neither necessary nor sufficient to remain wedded to the term ‘TCK’ when engaging with the kinds of mobile children and young people described here. Instead, what becomes clear is that the centrality of a particular notion of ‘culture’ to this category may be rather limiting, and warrants further scrutiny. Adding to Tanu’s (2015) pertinent critique of the term, the papers gathered here point towards inserting further dimensions of analysis. These include a more nuanced attention to different understandings of ‘culture.’ As Tanu shows in her paper, much research on TCKs has been characterized by forms of methodological nationalism. This has led to the foregrounding of ‘national’ cultures as key units of analysis within international school communities, even though this obscures young peoples’ much more complicated experiences of identification and social relations. Similarly, Desilets argues that in order to successfully navigate transnational social fields, the young people in her study need to skillfully absorb and utilize what are considered elements of ‘national’ as well as ‘international’ cultures. Knowledge of how to deploy these different cultural competences, or ‘culture-switching’ becomes a central aspect of their journeys. Developing yet another perspective, Korpela proposes that the young children of lifestyle migrant families in Goa may be most appropriately understood through the lens of a sub- or counterculture. This positions them in contrast to students at those international schools who are more firmly embedded in a global corporate circuit of capital and labour. In addition, Korpela also emphasizes the roles that children themselves play in creating cultural practices, a tenet that is well established in Western-based childhood studies, but which tends to be neglected in much of TCK research.

A further insight emerging from the papers is their insistence on the central role of socio-economic differences, which all too often become subsumed under homogenizing discourses of ‘cultures.’ One might be justly wary of applying notions of ‘class’ in a transnational field, especially since these can be shown to be flexible, relational and contextual. It emerges, however, that children and young people are aware of the very uneven territory through which they are navigating. In Korpela’s case, the children lead comfortable lives in India compared with much (though not all) of the local population; however, they also experience precarity in relation to visa regimes and their parents’ varied and unpredictable income streams. Korpela therefore queries the assumed privilege of such internationally mobile young people, and reminds us that few people are entirely at liberty -financially and legally- to move as they wish. Fechter picks up the question of privilege, and asks if, or in what ways, having parents who work in international aid may make any difference to their children’s

understandings of privilege, poverty, and their own position in relation to those. It turns out that while these aid worker children were acutely aware of the socio-economic status of their wealthy Cambodian peers at school, they had simultaneously learned to avoid politically or morally contentious issues in their interactions, aiming to maintain sociable relations and minimizing friction.

In addition to more nuanced and multiple understandings of culture, an increased awareness of ‘class,’ socio-economic status and privilege, the papers collectively point at the relevance of place, or locality, for the study of these mobile children. Given the prevailing methodological focus on international schools as institutions, many studies have overlooked the role that is played by the local, social, political and cultural environment, and how it is viewed and valued by these young people. Tellingly, Tanu demonstrates how ‘Indonesian’ culture and language are often considered negligible—and even detrimental—for the ‘international,’ cosmopolitan capital with which students are expected to be equipped. Similarly, while Goa is praised by the lifestyle migrants for its climate and comfort, relations with Indian nationals are often limited to service personnel, rather than more in-depth social engagement. For the young people in Desilets’ case, it matters a great deal whether their international school is based in Australia—making them marginal, but invisible outsiders—or whether it is in Singapore, where their more visible ethnic difference provides them with a clearly demarcated place in an international enclave. Finally, in Fechter’s case, the particular juxtaposition of privilege and poverty comes about because of their parents’ work, which by definition takes place in countries in need of overseas aid, thus positing the question of how they understand poverty more acutely, insofar as they have daily, concrete exposure to it.

In sum, the aim of the papers here is, in the first instance, to contribute to a growing critical examination of the scholarly notion of the TCK through bringing some of the theoretical tools and methodological insights established in migration studies to bear on other kinds of mobile children than those that mainstream migration studies are commonly concerned with. It is a reminder to proponents of the TCK paradigm that these are not solely defined by ‘culture,’ but by a more complex amalgamation of social, ethnic and political elements. We also suggest that migration studies scholars may include children who are in some ways privileged in their debates of what it means to be young and internationally mobile, to broaden our understanding of who are the ‘child migrants.’

## Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this paper.

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